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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001942

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PHUM](#) [BA](#) [POL](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTION HIGHLIGHTS 7: GENERAL POLLING STATIONS,
VOTE-BUYING

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Leading Shi'a cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem encouraged candidates and the public November 10 to lobby the government to eliminate the ten general polling centers. Members of the three-person High Commission for Elections said that it would be impossible to do away with the general centers and still hold the elections on schedule, but they noted that the High Commission was considering permitting candidate representatives to observe voting at these centers. Leading Shi'a political society Al Wifaq Secretary General Shaikh Ali Salman alleged November 13 that cash payments, payment of utility bills, and the purchase of food for voters were all forms of vote-buying that were occurring in the campaign. The first official complaint against a candidate for bribing a voter was announced publicly November 15. The voter who filed the complaint alleged that the candidate gave him a BD 100 (\$265) check, which he turned over to authorities, to change his address so he and his family could vote for the candidate. Al Wasat newspaper sources claimed November 14 that the High Commission would likely ignore four requests from international organizations that had requested to observe the election. In a private meeting with Emboffs, Ministry of Justice Undersecretary Shaikh Khalid Bin Ali Al Khalifa said that the decision whether or not to allow international observers was political and beyond the mandate of the High Commission to make. End summary.

12. (SBU) GENERAL POLLING STATIONS: In his Friday sermon November 10, prominent Shi'a cleric Shaikh Isa Qassem encouraged candidates, institutions, and the people to lobby the government for the elimination of the ten general polling stations. He pointed out that if monitoring is restricted to access by a candidate and his single chosen representative to the polling center in his constituency, they would not be able to cover the ten general stations. He added that if a candidate cannot cover all polling stations from which he and his competitors receive votes, there will not be overall effective monitoring.

13. (SBU) Judge Abdulrahman Al Sayed, member of the three-person High Commission for Elections working in conjunction with Minister of Justice Dr. Mohamed Ali Al Sitri, stated November 11 that the High Commission is considering allowing candidate representatives to be present as observers in the ten general polling stations. Fellow member of the High Commission for Elections Judge Khalid Ajaji stated November 14 that the elimination of the general poll centers was impossible at this point if the elections were to be held on schedule. He claimed that the demands for their removal were not justified. He reminded the public that NGOs will monitor the polls, and that judicial authorities are directly managing the process.

14. (SBU) Twenty-six candidates signed and publicly announced November 15 a petition of request to King Hamad that he issue

a royal decree eliminating the general polling stations. Leading Shi'a political society Al Wifaq president Shaikh Ali Salman was scheduled to meet with the Minister of Justice November 16 to discuss the general poll centers, among other election issues. Columnist Sawsan Al Shaer wrote November 15 about the general polling stations, saying that even the High Commission for Elections admits that monitoring of the general stations is going to be difficult. She inquired, "How will we... ensure that the election process is fair and transparent? Will we risk damaging the efforts of the King to restore the trust of the voters by not resolving an issue such as these centers that are an irritant to the public?"

15. (SBU) VOTE-BUYING, POLITICAL NATURALIZATION: Al Wifaq president Shaikh Ali alleged in media reports November 13 that vote-buying was occurring in the forms of cash payments, the payment of supporters' utility bills, and food purchases for voters. He said that in the most egregious instance a candidate offered to pay over \$900,000 to purchase a building for a women's NGO in exchange for the votes of its members. Shaikh Ali also claimed that the GOB continued to naturalize expatriates for political advantage. "We believe that in the last two weeks on average 200 people weekly were referred to the immigration authorities to obtain passports," Shaikh Ali stated.

16. (SBU) Arabic dailies announced November 15 that a voter filed the first official complaint against a candidate for vote-buying, presenting as evidence a check worth BD 100 (\$265) allegedly given to him by a Central Governorate candidate. The accused allegedly offered the money in exchange for the voter to change his address to the candidate's district and give the candidate his and his family's votes on election day. It was reported November 16

MANAMA 00001942 002 OF 003

that the complainant was summoned to the Public Prosecution, and he provided a full description of the situation, including contact information for two witnesses. It was expected that the accused candidate would be called to the Public Prosecution November 16.

17. (C) INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS: Arabic daily Al Wasat sources claimed November 14 that the High Commission for Elections was inclined to ignore the requests of four international organizations to observe the elections. The article said the High Commission would not issue a public decision approving or refusing their participation in election observation. In a meeting November 6 with MEPI Regional Office Director and Poloff, Ministry of Justice Undersecretary Shaikh Khalid Bin Ali Al Khalifa said that the High Commission for Elections would not reject the requests by international organizations to participate in election observation. He confided that both he and the Minister of Justice personally thought that allowing international observers would be beneficial to the process. He said, however, that the High Commission did not have the authority in its mandate to decide whether to permit or refuse the requests of international observers. This is a political decision that would have to be made at higher levels of the government or by other government ministries, he said.

18. (SBU) CONCERN ABOUT SUNNI PARTICIPATION: Second vice chairman of the Council of Representatives Sunni Adel Al Mo'awada said publicly November 12 that the Sunnis in Bahrain are displaying indifference to the elections and are not enthusiastic about voting. On the other hand, he said, the Shi'a community has been energized by the elections. He encouraged citizens of both sects to participate. In addition, Al Mo'awada criticized the media for being against candidates with religious tendencies and promoting liberals.

19. (SBU) WOMEN CANDIDATES: Wa'ad candidate Munira Fakhro, who is also receiving Al Wifaq support and who many observers recognize as having the best chances among women candidates at winning her district, is in a tight race with her primary

competitor MP Salah Ali (Al Minbar). Results of a pro-government Arabic daily Al Watan poll released November 16 show Ali receiving the support of 30% and Fakhro receiving support from 28% of those polled.

¶10. (SBU) The campaign manager for independent candidate Mariam Al Ruwaie, president of the recently-formed Women's Union, was arrested by military police November 9 and charged with breaking the law prohibiting active duty military personnel from running in an election or serving in an election campaign. The decision of the military court was announced November 13, stating that Al Ruwaie's campaign manager was sentenced to 30 days in prison. Family members expressed shock at the verdict, claiming that no other members of the military who were involved in election campaigns had been jailed.

¶11. (SBU) VOTERS OUTSIDE BAHRAIN: The registration period for Bahrainis living outside the country to vote in the parliamentary elections concluded November 7, with a total of 1,160 voters registered. Voters casting their ballots at embassies abroad will not be permitted to vote in the municipal races. Those voting at embassies will vote on November 21 for the first round and November 28 for the second round. Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS) president Jasim Al Ajmi said publicly November 13 that BTS had received approval to monitor the embassy voting and is making plans to send representatives to three or four of the embassies with the highest number of registrants.

¶12. (C) COMMENT: The general polling stations are controversial because of concerns that the government may try to use them to influence the outcomes of tight races in specific constituencies. The government defends their use, saying they serve to encourage people to vote because they will be set up in convenient locations, such as the airport, a shopping mall, large industrial plants like aluminum manufacturer ALBA, and other similar spots. Critics contend that Bahrain is not a large country - as one contact said, "This isn't China" - and voters should not have any trouble getting to the voting centers in their home constituencies. Of greatest concern is the general voting center located at the King Fahd causeway connecting Bahrain to Saudi Arabia. There are reportedly thousands of Saudis who, because of their ancestral roots in Bahrain, have Bahraini citizenship. They are overwhelmingly Sunni and, because they have no real ties to Bahrain, are susceptible to arguments in favor of voting for specific candidates. Those opposing the general voting centers consider the voting center at the causeway to be a concession to the convenience of the Saudi-Bahrainis,

MANAMA 00001942 003 OF 003

who are expected to cast their votes according to the wishes of the government.

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